

Mentor/Mentee: A Delicate Balance of Chemistry

by Mr. Tom Reilly, Administrative Contracting Officer, Burlington Team, DCMA Philadelphia; Ms. Kerri-Anne Roberts, Contract Administrator, Keystone Intern, DCMA Philadelphia; and Mr. Stuart Harrow, Chief, Burlington Team, DCMA Philadelphia

After years of striving to become a leaner organization, DCMA has been left with a leadership and knowledge gap between average-aged staffers in their 50s and recent hires. While the Agency benefits from such an experienced staff, the importance of the transfer of organizational knowledge looms large as this group begins to approach retirement. As DCMA strives to build its future workforce with the right people with the right skills, it is partnering with universities to recruit the best and the brightest future professionals. In order to be seen as an employer of choice, the Agency offers significant prospects to students through its Keystone Intern program. This mentoring program facilitates the transfer of organizational knowledge and acclimates its interns to the organization in general.

THE MENTOR SPEAKS

Mr. Tom Reilly, administrative contracting officer, Burlington Team, DCMA Philadelphia

I have been in “the contract admin game” for over 175 years, an administrative contracting officer (ACO) for over 126 years.

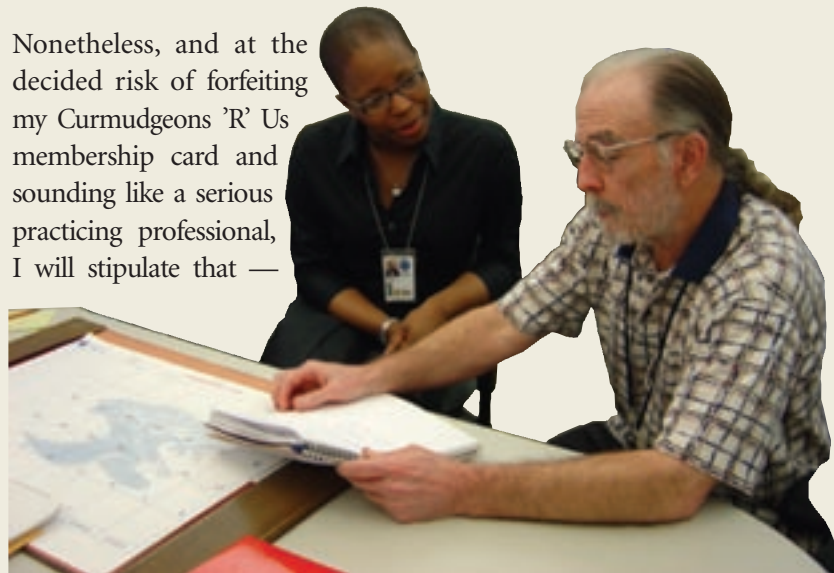
Excuse me, those figures were stated in dog years (which as any furry, wet-nosed, flea-challenged warranted individual knows is a perfectly understandable misstatement).

Allow me to rephrase: I have been in the “contract admin game” for 25 years, an ACO for over 18 of

those years. Other than the infrequent episode of messianic delusion, the occasional authority issue outbreak and a generalized distrust of humanity (characteristics that have served me admirably as an ACO), I remain, in my not-so-humble opinion, the apotheosis of the term “people person” (notwithstanding my wife’s reference to me as a prickly personality).

So on or about Nov. 1, 2004, when I was unilaterally designated as mentor to a Keystone Intern, Ms. Kerri-Anne Roberts, only marginally older than my warrant, it was not surprising that I did NOT immediately break into endless refrains of *Ode to Joy*. I did not think I would enjoy this endeavor at all because I, as a general rule, do not like surprises, and the arrival of and consequent responsibility for training of said intern was a literal and figurative surprise.

Nonetheless, and at the decided risk of forfeiting my Curmudgeons ‘R’ Us membership card and sounding like a serious practicing professional, I will stipulate that —



(Right) Mr. Tom Reilly and Ms. Kerri-Anne Roberts discuss a daily work plan. (Photo by Mr. Joseph Piazza, DCMA Philadelphia.)

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based on three-plus months of the mentor/mentee experience — the daily dynamic has been challenging, energizing, stimulating and frequently fun. The day-to-day training experience has also brought to the forefront (and to the frontal lobe) serious personal and professional issues that concern (and to some degree alarm) me as a committed — dare I say passionate (and I was passionate before it became fashionable) — contracting professional. These issues involve legacy, knowledge transfer and Agency viability/survivability.

Legacy

Do I want my legacy to include, in addition to a solid reputation for reliability, integrity, *etc.*, the fostering of a solid professional? Yes.

The advent of the intern perforce caused me to confront/contemplate the issues of:

- personal comfort — Do I want to embrace the demands inherent in training the “new guy/gal”?
- personal legacy — Do I want my knowledge and business practices to survive (and ideally thrive) within the Agency in the person of Ms. Roberts (either metaphorically or literally)?

The short — and somewhat personally surprising — answer to both has been, “Yes.”

Knowledge

Ah, knowledge transfer (NOT to be confused with that Olympian phrase ‘knowledge management’). Do I possess the remotest clue or most rudimentary skill in this transaction I call knowledge transfer? I don’t know. Only the passage of time (at least two

years) and the assessment of the intern’s skills tested under quotidian (to use a word that I like but have never before used) requirements will tell.

Knowledge transfer is that decidedly unscientific, extraordinarily labor-intensive (often times vexing) process of deconstructing 25 years of aggregated specialized (frequently arcane) knowledge; deconstructing and reconstituting/reconstructing as knowledge bytes, if you will, all the while creating context:

- What is a universal contracting principle?
- What is a mechanization of contract administrative services (MOCAS)-unique situation?
- And while we’re at it, what is MOCAS and why?

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Agency Viability/Survivability

Agency viability — the 800-pound gorilla next to the fax machine that no one wants to acknowledge, let alone confront. Will the infusion of new blood, the mentoring, and the transfer of knowledge save the day?

The Agency’s viability will be determined by its ability/willingness to recruit/mentor a sufficient number of Kerri-Annes to avoid becoming a hollowed-out, nominal contracting entity. This is dangerous because the Agency is increasing the contracting-out trend and, at the end of the day, keeping

only the absolute essentials (the warranted contracting officers and the critical skills quality assurance representatives).



The DCMA Philadelphia Burlington Team. Seated, from left: Mr. Tom Reilly, Ms. Marjorie Rose and Ms. Jeannie Karpoff. Standing, from left: Army Col. Andy Mills, DCMA Philadelphia commander; Ms. Loretta Boyce; Mr. Stuart Harrow; Ms. Kerri-Anne Roberts; Mr. Paul Dickel; Ms. Rosemary Gillen; and Mr. Eddie V. Thorne Sr. (Photo by Mr. Joseph Piazza, DCMA Philadelphia.)

THE MENTEE SPEAKS

Ms. Kerri-Anne Roberts, contract administrator,
Keystone Intern, DCMA Philadelphia

I'm taking it day by day. Mr. Reilly keeps counting the days. When he talks to me, he often prefaces his sentences with, "In your seventy-something days here ..." I keep asking him, "Tom, are you counting up or down?"

There's an e-mail that Mr. Reilly sent me within my first four days on the job that I sometimes refer to if I'm feeling frustrated or unsure about my place at the Agency:

You now work for the Defense Contract Management Agency (DCMA), specifically DCMA Philadelphia. DCMA is a component agency within the Department of Defense (DoD). Line of authority runs as follows: president of U.S. to/through secretary/deputy secretary of Defense to/through under-secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology & Logistics [USD (AT&L)] to/through director of DCMA (Maj. Gen. Scott) to/through Col. Andy Mills. Broadly speaking, DCMA manages contracts awarded by military service procurement offices to commercial entities for "supplies and services."

Our broad task is to ensure that the "thing" (the supply or the service that we have contracted for) gets to (in terms of supplies) or supports (in terms of service contracts) the warrior (men/women in uniform anywhere everywhere in the world). Broadly speaking, we accomplish this mission by making sure that a "quality" (acceptable) supply/

service gets to that warrior in a timely fashion and that the commercial entity that produced the supply or rendered the service is paid the agreed upon price.

As I have told you about 105 times since you came in the door: in the performance of your contract administration duties your three primary "audiences/markets/constituencies" will be the customer (the procuring command issuing the contract); the contractor; and a data/metrics audience.

Customer and contractor are external. Data/metrics is internal (we "own" the contracts' data and contract admin. metrics and are responsible for data integrity and attendant performance).

The e-mail was a recap of what Mr. Reilly had told me on another occasion. I saved it because whenever I read it, it instills in me a sense of 'being here' in the organization.

For the most part, I am enjoying my internship at DCMA, and I am certainly learning a lot. There are many perks to working here, like the computer-based training applications [wink and smile]. Also, I get to read a lot of contracts.

Mr. Reilly has consistently cautioned me not to make an assumption WITHOUT having first read the source document (the contract), the contract modification or any other appropriate documents.

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Every day is fun. The employees and my peers make the job interesting. I like to be competitive. I like to stand out from the crowd. It's just the way I am. I'm selfish. I don't want to share Mr. Reilly with the other interns. When my two and a half years are up, then I'll share.

Sometimes it's difficult to follow Mr. Reilly. I'm just a squirrel in his world trying to get a nut. But I'm nosey. I ask a lot of questions. He likes that. I ask him a lot of personal questions too. I know about his grandchildren. Sometimes I think this annoys him, but other times I think it tickles him a little that I care about his personal life outside of the office. What really meant a lot to me was when he and his wife said I could call if I ever needed anything. They're concerned about me.

Mr. Reilly likes the challenge of explaining things. There's a lot of positive energy. No two days are the same here — every day I learn. He's very responsive. He doesn't mind explaining things twice. For example, he won't say, "Didn't we cover that Thursday?" He's concerned about explaining things clearly. If he thinks he hasn't explained things clearly, he'll write a two- or three-page synopsis of what he said. Ms. Loretta Boyce (our contract administrator) suggested putting these notes in a binder for our next intern. I like the notes, and I like to pick his brain. It's like school: it gives me a syllabus for what we're doing.

Working with Mr. Reilly has made me realize that I am part of a knowledge transfer process. When I first arrived, Mr. Reilly gave me Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* to read. In the novel, one of the characters, Yossarian, was told that the flies in another character's eyes prevented him from seeing things as they really are. Mr. Reilly says that I too have flies in my eyes. He sees

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my naïveté and awe at being new in the organization as being the "flies" that blind me from seeing things as they really are. But my naïveté and awe are slowly fading as I learn more and more about the Agency. From my short time at DCMA, here are some examples of lessons learned, minefields to avoid and thoughts on where the Agency might want to go:

Lessons Learned

- **Adaptability** — This is an older organization in terms of the age of the workforce and its lack of new employees, and being both a young and new employee is difficult at times. When I walked in the door on my first day, I found that the processes for getting me through Human Resources were not very clear — either to me or to my managers. The office was not used to bringing in new employees, an event which doesn't happen very often. I also found an organization that both welcomed me and, in some respects, felt threatened by me. I'm told that the average age of this CMO's workforce is 58. Many of them saw me as new blood and fresh energy. But some saw my college education and my career progression (GS-7/9/11) as something that they had not been able to attain.
- **Assimilation** — Being a recent college graduate entering the government sector requires some adjustments. It's a completely different world. I don't always feel that I have a definite direction; the path is not as clear as going through a degree program to graduation. Mr. Reilly has shared with me how he was trained over 20 years ago, when he came in with a class of 18 other interns and every day was accounted for. He still keeps in touch with one member of his class who became a deputy assistant

secretary of Defense. I've contrasted that with my internship. Many days I find myself on my own, relying on my own initiative to make the day productive. I picture Mr. Reilly's program as a hand that pulled the interns forward; my internship program places me in a position where I have to push myself forward.

- "Challenges or opportunities?" — The Keystone program is chaotic, but the challenge of not being able to take fundamental courses unveils an opportunity for on-the-job training and firsthand exposure.

Minefields to Avoid

Don't get hung up on what's not available to you. Utilize what is!

For example, there may not be funds available for tuition reimbursement; or some of the courses on my Individual Development Plan may have long waiting lists. These are things that I can't change but I've got to work with, so I look at the training opportunities that are available, such as on-the-job training. Having a "best-fit" mentor certainly advocates that.

Where do we Want to Go?

The Agency should:

- Learn and embrace the dynamics of the organization. Why? Because I'm just one of many new faces who will "be" the organization
- Increase emphasis on the youth of the organization
- Assign mentors — best-fit practice
- Create team orientations

My initial orientation focused on DoD and DCMA and its context within the larger acquisition community. I live with the Burlington Team, and I've gradually gotten an idea of what the team does and where I fit in. I would have liked an orientation at the beginning. I also would have felt more comfortable if my first exposure to the intern program would have been with peers of my own age, as opposed to being in a class of one.

So you can see from my list that I've already learned a lot from working with Mr. Reilly. I like Mr. Reilly, and Mr. Reilly likes me. We're kind of like cats and dogs — more like dogs and kittens. I'm the kitten, he's the dog. He's a big teddy bear. He doesn't want to admit it, but he is.

THE MENTOR AND MENTEE SPEAK

As mentor and mentee, we have come to appreciate the special chemistry we share. This positive chemistry promotes effective knowledge transfer by allowing for candid feedback responses and making the effort (which is real, and taxing, and vexing at times) seem less like work. Such a relationship wouldn't work with negative chemistry; it would likely result in the new employee being left to his or her own devices (the pedagogical 'sink or swim' approach). Based on our experience, it seems that DCMA offices should guard against the law of random selection in determining who will be mentors. If the designated mentor doesn't want to engage in the process, then the recalcitrant mentor will not do so effectively, even if the individual remains the nominal mentor of record (the mentor, remember, has real work to do, and there is no "little something extra in the paycheck" for the training efforts). DCMA offices should also eliminate/minimize barriers to entry: MOCAS and all other appropriate applications should be accessible by the intern as quickly as possible to ease assimilation in the Agency.

On a personal level, both of us have undergone small transformations. The mentor has learned to be more paternal in the finest sense of the word, which means being "more patient, always alert to the fact that I am dealing with a kid — albeit a precocious one — and not a hard-shelled adult. Trust me: in my daily dealings I am protean, but paternal is NOT one of my usual jeweled aspects." In turn, the mentee has learned to look at every experience as a learning opportunity and understand that everything has some explanation, even if it's not obvious at first. The mentee wants to get to the point where she doesn't have flies in her eyes.